

"Faithfulness and Doubt, Love and Mistrust"

First Presbyterian, Marshfield

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Luke 13:31-35

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Faith is worked out in the places between God's promises and our doubt. Trust is worked out in the places between God's love and our mistrust.

(We may feel a little like Charlie Brown with this faith and trust thing. One memorable *Peanuts* cartoon is the one where Lucy is holding the football upright on the ground with her finger. Charlie Brown is eyeing the football and get ready to run forward and kick it. As he is running, just at the last second, Lucy yanks the football away. Charlie Brown misses the kick and falls flat on his backside.)

Trust is a fragile thing. We may be tempted to conclude from human behavior that God cannot be trusted. Today's Scripture lessons record, however, that it breaks God's heart when we fail to have faith in God's promises and refrain from trusting in God's love.

IN THE FIRST SCRIPTURE READING TODAY, ON THE ONE HAND, ABRAHAM DOUBTS GOD WILL DELIVER ON THE PROMISE. GOD PROMISED ABRAHAM A LAND, AND NOW AN HEIR TO PRODUCE DESCENDANTS WHO WILL BECOME THE GREAT NATION, ISRAEL. FOR ABRAHAM AND SARAH ARE CHILDLESS.

Abram and Sarai left Ur of Chaldees to inherit the great land God had given them between the Tigris River and the Euphrates, what is called the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East. It wasn't an automatic gift, Abram's people would have to wait in Egypt until the time of the Palestinians' iniquity, then God would grant them the land. They would have to wait for 400 years. They would have to be patient.

Then, Abraham protests that God has not fulfilled the promise of an heir. "*But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"*" (Genesis 15:2)

I cannot think of anything we would rather not do than wait or be patient. We live in a culture that promises we won't have to wait. We are told that we can buy happiness and have all that we want or desire right now! Needs and wants and desires can be gratified instantly. So, why practice spiritual disciplines and take forty days to go through the Lenten journey when we can have our hearts' desires right now?

(Martin Copenhaver says, "When I was in high school, I was wondering what to do with my life, as many teenagers worry about that time in life. I asked our church's Director of Christian Education how in the world one could ever know that God's call was for your life.

She responded, "Where the needs of the world cross with your God-given gifts, that is your call."

There are times when we must make a 100 percent commitment to something about which we are only 51 percent certain.")

-*Living Faith While Holding Doubts*, New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989.

Spurned, we've always had difficulty trusting one another, and by extension, God.

IN THE SECOND SCRIPTURE READING TODAY, ON THE OTHER HAND, GOD GRIEVES JERUSALEM'S REJECTING THE LOVE HE OFFERS. JESUS, GOD INCARNATE, WEEPS OVER JERUSALEM'S FAILURE TO BELIEVE IN GOD'S GOODNESS. JERUSALEM HAS REJECTED THE PROPHETS GOD SENT. JESUS LAMENTS JERUSALEM'S FAILURE TO RECEIVE THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S COMING KINGDOM. HE REALIZES HE IS ABOUT TO BE CRUCIFIED AS WERE THE PROPHETS BEFORE HIM.

Stubborn, stiff-necked Jerusalemites. Knowing that they are children of God, yet resisting the love God offers, going their own way, rebelling against God, killing the prophets, failing to follow Jesus and accept him as Lord and Christ, and, generally, making things worse for themselves.

Jesus laments, "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*" (Luke 13:34)

God longs to gather all of his children as a hen gathers her brood of chicks under her wings and protects them. Yet God's children scurry away, unwilling to accept the safety and love God offers.

There are other things out there we want to try, other saviors we want to follow.

(Bill Tammeus, an elder in Second Church, Kansas City, MO and former columnist for the Kansas City Star, wrote in *The Presbyterian Outlook*:

"Human history is a long, long series of proofs that – this side of heaven – people are not, in fact, perfectible.

In some ways that's why Karl Barth's commentary on Romans was so explosive when it was published soon after the end of World War I, which the poet Ezra Pound lamented had been uselessly fought for a world he called "an old bitch gone in the teeth. . . . a botched civilization." Barth understood that the perfectibility of humanity that some branches of Christianity envisioned was fool's gold, and he called all of us back to the idea that the reason we need a savior is precisely because we aren't and never will be perfectible. . . .

Following Jesus requires us to abandon our perfectionist illusions – first about ourselves, then about others – even as we work and hope and pray so that peace will fill the earth.")

-"*What price peace?*" by Bill Tammeus, p. 23, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Feb. 22, 2010.

Jesus wept as he looked out over the Holy City.

EVEN THOUGH THE CHURCH TODAY HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF CENTURIES OF HINDSIGHT, EACH NEW GENERATION MUST WORK OUT ITS OWN SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING. TRUE, ABRAHAM AND SARAH DID INHERIT A LAND AND WERE GIVEN DESCENDANTS NUMBERING THE STARS. TRUE, JESUS DID REDEEM JERUSALEM AND ALL OF HUMANKIND THROUGH HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION. TRUE, JERUSALEM BECAME THE DEPARTURE POINT FOR THE MISSIONARY JOURNEYS. BUT FAITH MUST BE CLAIMED BY EACH NEW GENERATION. GOD'S GRACIOUS GIVE OF LOVE MUST BE EMBRACED IN EACH AGE ANEW.

How ironic it is that Jerusalem, the Holy City at the center of the promises of God's salvation and redemption is the place where religious people and government officials conspired against God, fought the notion of God's sovereignty, and killed God's messengers of peace and love. Jerusalem would be destroyed and Abraham's descendants would be scattered all over the earth. But Jerusalem would also be the place where Jesus would die and rise, the church would be born, and from which the apostles would travel to spread the good news in other lands.

Our loyalties and allegiances are being tested all of the time. Are we citizens of this nation and world or citizens of heaven? Are we trusting in the promises of this life or the next? Why is it so hard for us to accept God's goodness? Why are we so suspicious of God and neighbor? Why is it easier to doubt than to risk faith? Why do we mistrust rather than feel the love?

(A retired Wycliffe Bible Translator from Canada sends out a newsletter. For years the translator was in Brazil putting the Bible into the language of the Canela people.

"One day a colleague told him that he was certain two of the Canela had become followers of Christ – referring to a husband and wife who had learned to read, then were enlisted as a part of the translation team to read the final draft of the Scripture booklets that had been prepared.

"But how do you know they have repented?" the translator asked. "Because the husband has stopped being harsh with his wife. He's been treating her really nice for some time now. And do you remember how stingy his wife was? Well, for the last few months she has been very generous, helping others, and feeding people who are not even her relatives!" the colleague replied.

The translator was convinced this was the real deal because "They were bearing fruit: love, kindness, generosity – the universal indicators of repentance valid in all cultures, and in every age.")

-*"Prepared and productive"* by Heidi Husted Armstrong, interim pastor of Trinity Church, Tacoma, Wash., p.31, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 8, 2010.

Out Lenten disciplines, then, are a matter of moving from doubt to faith, mistrust to love. They are a matter of our saying "Yes" to having God be a big part of our lives. They motivate us to pass God's gifts of life and love on to others.

When will we be willing trust God's promises, as father Abraham had to learn?

When will we be willing to accept God's love, wherein God chose to become one of us in Jesus, suffer and die that we might be redeemed and transformed?

The Lenten Journey is one where we bounce between faith and doubt, love and mistrust, occasionally resting in God and finding peace.